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NARRATIVES OF PLACE: REASONS TO LOOK UP

By

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Bachelors of Arts, Berea College, Berea, KY, 2014

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts
in Ceramics

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

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2019

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Abstract:

Chairperson: Julia Galloway

Narratives of Place: Reasons to Look Up, is an exploration and reflection of Dean Leeper's personal interactions and relationship to the landscape of Missoula, Montana, while as a graduate student at the University of Montana. This paper explores his thoughts, definitions, influences, reflections and descriptions of his most recent work created for his Masters of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition. Leeper presents his work and ideas as a small part of a larger, ongoing dialog of how humans understand ideas of place as they relate to finding a sense of self identity.

Acknowledgments

The last three years have been monumental for me as an individual and artist. I am truly grateful for the knowledge, experience, and skills I have gained during my three years at the University of Montana. I thank all those who contributed to my experience while in Missoula and for helping me become the person, and the artist, I am today.

I particularly want to thank my thesis committee. Thank you for the time, dedication, support and guidance you all have given me over the last three years. I can't thank you enough for what you have taught me as a student, artist, and individual. Thank you, Julia Galloway, Trey Hill, Rafael Chacón, and Betsy Bach.

Thank you to the entire School of Art: the faculty, staff, and studio technicians for all you do for the visual arts program at the University and for making my time here a rich and positive experience. Thank you to all of my fellow graduate students, post-baccalaureates, and undergraduates within the School of Art. Thank you for the critiques, the laughs, the kind words, and friendships. It has been a privilege to be part of such a great community. Thank you all.

And of course, I want to thank my immediate family for encouraging me to pursue my passion in art and for your unconditional love and support. Thank you for everything you have done for me. I love you.

Most importantly, thank you to my fiancée Kyia Lindau. We moved to Montana together and you have been my main support every day for the last three years. Thank you for helping make this experience so rewarding and for always pushing me to be the best I can be. I am forever grateful.

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“If space allows movement, place is pause.”¹

Background: Travel and Place

“Place” has been an important theme throughout my life. I was born in Monroe, Wisconsin in a large barn my father had converted into a house. Ever since, my understanding of “place” has been defined by time spent living both in the United States and overseas. I am fortunate to have called Madison, Wisconsin; Maputo, Mozambique; Kiev, Ukraine; Richmond, Indiana; Mutare, Zimbabwe; Berea, Kentucky; Florence, Italy; and now, Missoula, Montana “home.” Each “home” has its own identity of “place;” and each has contributed to my identity.

Between travels, my family always returned to the green rolling hills, vibrant fall colors, and the many lakes of Madison, Wisconsin. I think of these places and experiences not as a nostalgic past I am trying to hold on to or to return to, but as experiences that help me understand and question my relationship to “place” today. How do I understand and respond to “place”? What is my role – an observer; a participant? What is my relationship to the landscape I see around me? These are the questions I have focused on as a student and artist for the last three years.

Moving from Madison to Missoula for graduate school at the University of Montana has given me the opportunity to ask these questions in depth while translating what I have experienced as “place” to the work I make in the studio. In this thesis I share my thoughts, definitions, influences, reflections, and descriptions of my most recent work and present my interactions with the Missoula landscape to the broader, ongoing dialog of “place.” I offer my narrative of how I understand, question, and live within “place.”

¹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.

Beginnings of “Place”

Ceramics captivated my interest from an early age. Being an active child, I was drawn to clay's natural characteristics. They were the perfect match for my need to be physical while providing me with a concrete and intense focus. The wet clay spurred my curiosity with its responsive and malleable qualities. I pursued this passion of working with clay throughout high school and then in college where I received my Bachelors of Art degree in ceramics from Berea College, in Berea, Kentucky.

At Berea, my ceramic training and experience were primarily focused on the production of utilitarian ware. I had a skill for it and I thoroughly enjoyed the labor within the process; the organization, the tasks, and the fulfillment and satisfaction of completing each task at hand. It wasn't until I went to the University of Wisconsin-Madison to study ceramics as a post baccalaureate student that I started to think more about the concept of “place” and how it influenced my studio practice and the work I was making.

The term “place” gradually became redefined as “landscape.” I began to question what it was about the physical landscape around me that I appreciated and found captivating. Reflecting on the landscape of Madison, the answer came easily. It was the many lakes I grew up with and knew so well. I started to focus on the concept of horizon lines within my work, referencing distant shores, light, reflections, and architecture; components which helped create the landscape around me. The more I intentionally looked, the more I began to find moments and compositions within the landscape. It was a new and exciting way to study and view the world around me and it felt like an honest form of inspiration.

“Thereness”

With my new-found interest of landscape, the transition to Montana was the perfect opportunity for me to continue using clay to explore and question my relationship to land and the place in which I was living. I was surrounded by it, embraced by the soft rolling mountains, crisp ridge lines, rivers, and forests; I was visually saturated by my new environment. This new landscape would become much more important to me than I could have possibly known at the time. I started by exploring the landscape through movement: camping, canoeing, biking, and hiking to new locations.

These experiences of moving through the landscape were unique and have undoubtedly influenced the way I view and experience the landscape of Montana. However, it was not the thoughts of grand excursions and long hikes I took into the studio with me, it was the every-day views from my commute to school or the view from the window of my apartment. It was the infinite variety of lines, forms, textures, and colors of the land that I witnessed every day.

This new familiarity with an ever-present landscape lead me to an awareness of “place” beyond mere landscape. I was building a connection and a sense of belonging or “thereness” to my new environment as a “Being in and of the world.”² Author Christopher Tilley writes about this concept of “thereness” in his book *A Phenomenology of Landscape* where he explains this common human experience of understanding one’s personal identity through perception and experience of place. Tilley states:

Being-in-the-world resides in a process of objectification in which people objectify the world by setting themselves apart from it. This results in the creation of a gap, a distance in space. To be human is both to create this distance between self and that which is beyond and to attempt to bridge this distance through a variety of means - through perception (seeing, hearing, touching), bodily actions and movements, and intentionality, emotion and awareness residing in systems of belief and decision-making, remembrance and evaluation.³

² Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994), 13.

³ Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, 12.

Without knowing it at the time, my connection and relationship to the landscape around Missoula was my initial research for the work I would create for my exhibition *Narrative of Place*.

Concept of Pause / Slowing down

I continued to develop and explore my relationship to Missoula's landscape. I found myself searching for visual information; slowing down to reflect and absorb what I saw. Tim Ingold in his book, *Lines: A Brief History*, provides a definition of "place" as, "a moment of rest along a path of movement."⁴ This definition resonates with me and describes my understanding and experience of "place." For example, as I biked through campus, through the crowds of students, each moving in their own direction I would look up to see the outline of Mt. Jumbo behind campus. This decision to pause and look up from the crowds provided me with a sense of calm and clarity in the midst of students talking and shuffling around. Seeing Mt. Jumbo provided me with a sense of orientation and awareness to my surroundings. Experiencing "place" in this manner became a positive and supportive interaction for me as an individual and as an artist living in Missoula.

Influence of Asian Philosophy and Aesthetics

Through my research into how people understand and interact with landscape, I have become increasingly influenced by East Asian philosophy and aesthetics, both in my art practice, as well as my finished work. My father was born in Japan and several family members still live there. As a child, I grew up surrounded by Japanese and Chinese imagery and traditional vessels. I bring much of this aesthetic appreciation into my art today which has influenced both my utilitarian and

⁴ Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 96.

sculptural work. I am also intrigued and influenced by Eastern philosophy, which is often in contrast to Western values and understanding of land.

My relationship to land focuses on questioning my own understanding of mind and matter. I see my work more as an integration with nature, rather than an objectification of it. By looking and creating, I become more aware of my connection to the rhythms of the natural world. It is a process that is both intimate and personal, as it is a realization of one's greater connectivity to the world.

Exhibition: *Narratives of Place*

Narratives of Place explores and displays some of the landscapes and natural phenomena commonly seen around Missoula, all of which were new to me upon arriving in Montana. The works I chose for the exhibition address ideas and imagery of forest fires, cloud inversions, elevation, ridge lines, and seasonal changes within the local landscape. As I near the end of my time and studies at the University of Montana, this exhibition has given me the opportunity to reflect on the time I have lived in Montana. The ten pieces in the exhibition represent what I have seen and experienced in this place I have learned to call home. "Place" for me can be defined as the landscape/cityscape of a certain location, as well as a specific position from which to look from. Each of my works presents a quiet, reflective sense of place; one that may help viewers question and identify their own relationship to their environment.

I will now examine three works from "Narratives of Place" in terms of their physical features, as well as some of the artists and artistic influences I have drawn upon in creating the works.

Evening Outline

Evening Outline presents viewers with a quiet yet assertive image of a mountain-scape at night. The work is comprised of a black wooden rectangle with an open front displaying seven thrown cylinders side by side. A glazed line connects all seven cylinders creating a mountain outline through the subtle distinction between the gray/black mountain on the base of the cylinders and a dark black sky on the top. This piece was influenced by my fascination with the difficulty of being able to see the outline of a mountain at night. I would often find myself peering at a faint outline of a mountain against the dark sky questioning whether it was, indeed, a mountain. I am always comforted by this visual experience and appreciative of the sense of presence a mountain can evoke, even at night. I know I can depend on the mountain to be the same mountain that I knew the day before.



Figure 1: Dean Leeper, *Evening Outline*, ceramic, 27.5 x 8.5 x 11.5", 2019.

Evening Outline is one of two pieces in the exhibition which I have included thrown cylinders. Cylinders for me, are a blank canvas which provide a two-dimensional surface with infinite possibilities. I intentionally keep the information on the cylinders to a minimum, with straight walls and no pronounced utilitarian features. This allows the cylinders to work together as multiples within a group to enhance what is being portrayed on the surface. I enjoy the dynamic line movement that wraps around each three-dimensional cylinder, connecting form to form.

I use cylinders within my studio practice because they give a depth and perspective to my work that a two-dimensional surface cannot. One of the biggest benefits I have found in using cylinders is that they require the viewer to look at the piece from a particular location if they want to see the intended composition. This complements my practice of actively and purposefully viewing a landscape from a specific location. In curating and presenting this view through three-dimensional cylinders, I can share my personal narrative of a place, and perhaps, create a similar opportunity for viewers to create their own sense of “place.”



Figure 2: Richard Diebenkorn, *Invented Landscape*, acrylic and gouache on paper, 1965.

Evening Outline, like many of my works, is informed and influenced by abstract landscape painting such as *Invented Landscape* (Fig. 2) by Richard Diebenkorn. I appreciate the way Diebenkorn's paintings pare down visual information into shapes and colors that inhabit our world. There is a subtle, yet bold, geometric quality to his compositions. I share this stylistic way of interpreting visual information. This is translated into my finished work through simplified expressions of line, color, texture and form.

Reasons to Look Up

Reasons to Look Up includes three vessel forms each on an individual wooden shelf, stacked in a vertical format. These vessel forms represent my appreciation and experience of living in a place where mountain forms make up the distant horizon lines. I have always been drawn to the crisp sharp line that is created between land and sky. There is a variety of information that helps create this visual experience of looking up at a mountain ridge. One might see green grass backed by a deep blue sky; white snow embraced by a heavy white sky; or the dry yellow grass giving support to soft white clouds in summer. Lighting, time of day, time of year, weather, and of course, the location from which one is viewing, all effect how these ridge lines are seen. Although the experience is primarily visual for me, the act of interacting with the landscape and what I see is almost always a multi-sensory, full body experience.

In my studio, I have spent a lot of time thinking about how to express and translate what I have seen and felt within my work. How can I take something as grand and infinite as a mountain ridge line and re-contextualize it into an object that communicates what I have seen and experienced to those who view my work? For these particular pieces, I have been influenced by the works of ceramic artist Wayne Higby and land/light, site specific artist James Turrell.



Figure 3: Dean Leeper, *Reasons to Look Up*, ceramic, 24 x 41 x 8", 2019.



Figure 4: Wayne Higby, *Josiah's Canyon Winter*, ceramic, 1979.

Making use of traditional utilitarian ceramic forms including bowls, jars, and lidded boxes, Higby's earliest work explored his interest and responsiveness to landscape through surface imagery and physical space within a three-dimensional form. In one of his artist statements, Higby writes, "I strive to establish a zone of quiet coherence - a place full of silent, empty space where finite and infinite, intimate and immense intersect."⁵ I, too, have chosen to use a vessel form with an interior and exterior surface to communicate visual and physical depth. Unlike Higby's work, my vessels in *Reasons to Look Up* do not make use of specific landscape imagery and are less tied to the preservation and history of traditional utilitarian ceramic forms. Instead, I have chosen to alter the form of my vessel to mirror my sculptural mountain forms, drawing attention to the combination of simple colors, textures, and lighting that I have come to associate with the landscape around Missoula.



Figure 5: James Turrell, *Skyspace I, Overhead portal*, room: 19' 8" x 11' 10" x 11' 10"; cut: 100" x 100", 1974.

⁵ Higby, Wayne, "Infinite Place: The Ceramic Art of Wayne Higby." Interview by Evan Dawson. *Arts InFocus*, March, 29, 2015.

In creating work that references a ridge line, it was important to me to communicate a line created not by a literal mark, but one that is formed by the meeting of the edges of two colors, texture or values. This line for me is how I perceive the ridge lines created between earth and sky. Upon looking at these horizon lines, my relationship to the visual experience is complex. There is a balance present between the sense of “place” and “space” which is created by the familiar shape of the land and the unfamiliar grandness of sky.

This concept of line and creating the allusion of “space” is illustrated well in works by artist James Turrell; specifically, within his Skylight series. In figure 4, *Skyspace I*, Turrell creates a physical experience for people to view the sky through a square portal, which is cut into the ceiling of the room. Here, Turrell creates an opportunity for viewers to experience the relationship between the interior ceiling and lighting within the room and the sky above, creating a sense of experienced space. In *Reasons to Look Up*, I do not use lighting as Turrell does to communicate space. Instead, I present a similar experience on a smaller scale where foreground, background, interior, exterior, colors, and textures all work together to create a sense of space, as well as a line between surfaces. Although Turrell and Higby’s work are very different, I appreciate the way their works address the concept of “place,” while presenting a finite and infinite interpretation of “space,” similar to my interpretation of a crisp mountain ridge line.

Elevation

Planning for my exhibition, I wanted to offer a variety of works in terms of scale, as well as presentation. I wanted some works mounted on the wall, and some on pedestals for viewers to be able to walk around and experience from multiple locations. *Elevation* is the most unique piece in the exhibition and the challenge of making and installing it pushed me beyond my comfort zone.

Elevation is not fired or glazed and had to be made in place to fill the fourteen feet between the two pillars of the gallery.



Figure 6: Dean Leeper, *Elevation*, unfired clay, sand, cement, 158 x 80 x 4", 2019.

The work references the physical slope or elevation of a mountain and is made with locally sourced clay from Missoula valley. The raw clay was rammed and tamped into a twelve-foot rectangular wooden frame, raised into place between the two pillars and then released from its frame to reveal the clay, strata and elevation of the mountain. My intention was to create a work that focused on the feeling and sense of incline one can both see and feel when standing on the side of a mountain. Through subtle differences in the material, I also wanted to depict the physical change in a landscape which can be experienced as a result of a change in elevation. To address this change, I split the twelve-foot tamped clay rectangle in half and used a darker clay additive in the lower half and kept the higher side as the white local clay.

Highlighting the natural characteristics of clay is of interest to many ceramic artists, including artist Paula Winokur. I appreciate Winokur's decision to reveal the textured quality of porcelain to resemble icebergs and landscapes as seen in her work *Iceberg Split* (Fig. 6). Presenting the raw unfired local clay was important to me in creating this work and ties the piece directly to the landscape of Missoula. *Elevation* displays the organic texture of fine clay material, as well as exposed rocks and larger debris tamped into the form. The clay also turned lighter in color, and developed cracks within the piece as the clay dried over time. Having *Elevation* included in the gallery helps viewers bridge the relationship between the unfired and fired pieces within the exhibition.

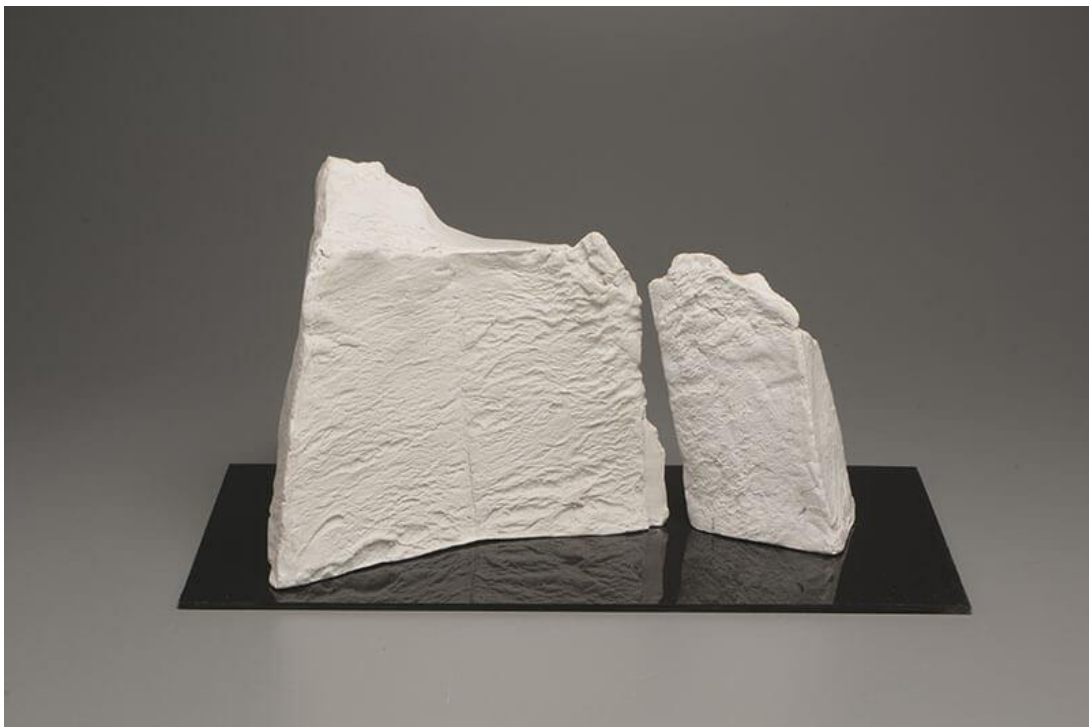


Figure 7: Paula Winokur, *Iceberg Split*, ceramic, black plexi, 15 x 22 x 6", 2015.

In creating *Elevation*, I also drew inspiration from the large-scale steel works by Richard Serra (Fig. 7), and the way in which his work engages his audience, causing them to question their interaction with space as well as the work. Although on a much smaller scale, I wanted *Elevation* to

have a similar effect on my viewers inviting them to be active alongside the work, while presenting an experience which speaks to the larger understanding of elevation.



Figure 8: Richard Serra, *NJ-2*, steel, 2016.

Making/Process

My studio practice and process has changed significantly while attending graduate school. The majority of the work in *Narratives of Place* were built with a slab base and closed with a simple hand building coiling technique. Hand building these forms has been a new process for me as it involves a different physicality and pace than that of working on the wheel. I enjoy the physical demands of working on larger sculptural forms. I find myself reacting to the clay; deciding when to build fast, build slow, pause, reevaluate, and when to feel the excitement of completing a form or idea.

Many of my works are influenced by a specific view or experience. I bring memories, pictures, and thoughts of experiences and landscape with me to my studio. Some works start with definite concept and are quick to take form, while others develop over time through making and

remaking. Being consistently active and critical of my decisions within the studio has helped me clarify and transfer my thoughts into physical forms.

Although I am not currently making pots, they have impacted the way I construct my sculptural forms. This can be seen in my decision to raise the bottom edge of my sculptural forms to give a sense of lift and physical shadow beneath it, similar to how many potters undercut the foot of their cup or bowl to give it a sense of separation from the flat surface upon which it sits. My knowledge of and experience in creating pots can also be seen in my surface treatment and use of atmospheric firings.

Firing

The firing process has been an important aspect of my studio process and I have primarily made use of atmospheric firings, including wood firing, salt, and soda firing. As the maker, I enjoy being able to have control over certain elements of the firing, while still leaving room for the excitement and unpredictability of a process that is never completely under my control.

For the majority of the works within *Narrative of Place*, I used a combination of colorants, oxides, washes and underglazes. All of the works, except *Fire Burn* (Fig. 14), which is painted, and *Elevation* (Fig. 6), which is unfired clay, were fired in a down draft gas salt/soda kiln in a light reduction atmosphere to Cone 6 (2232 degrees Fahrenheit). Due to the variety of surface and visual depth that atmospheric firings can produce on the surface of the work, I chose to use matte glazes, underglazes and oxides for my work. The addition of soda and salt into the kiln at high temperature helps to create a semi-gloss surface with variations in textures and color.

Conclusion

I feel fortunate to have had the last three years to live in a new place and strengthen my awareness of “place” through my art. It is a privilege to be able to present my perceptions and

thoughts and I hope my work shares the sense of positive appreciation I have for the landscape surrounding Missoula. Who knows how long it takes for someone to familiarize themselves with a new place? All I know is that I will always have my experience of living within mountains as a part of my identity and as an experience to help orient myself to wherever I go next. In closing, I would be presumptuous to impose my perceptions and experience onto the world as a shared reality. Instead, I can only offer my personal narratives to a shared humanistic need; the need to acquire a sense of self and identity.

EXHIBITION IMAGES:



Figure 9: Dean Leeper, *Narratives of Place*, March 14th- April 5th, 2019.



Figure 10: Dean Leeper, *Eastward*, ceramics. 51 x 9 x 22", 2019.



Figure 11: Dean Leeper, *Mountain Shadow*, ceramic, 46 x 19 x 15.5", 2019.



Figure 12: Dean Leeper, *Thaw*, ceramic, 44 x 5 x 15", 2019.



Figure 13: Dean Leeper, *Inversion*, ceramic, wood, glass, 25.5 x 2 x 14.5", 2019.



Figure 14: Dean Leeper, *Fire Burn*, ceramic, paint, graphite, 65 x 17 x 18.5", 2019.



Figure 15: Dean Leeper, *Crisp*, ceramic, 40 x 7.5 x 13", 2019.



Figure 16: Dean Leeper, *Moment of Rest: Witness to Change*, ceramic, 41 x 11 x 15.25", 2019.

Appendix I

Clay Body: (Trey Hill's Sculpture Clay Recipe) - mid to high fire

Hawthorn	50
Gold Art	25
OM4	25
Medium Grog 35-50 mesh	25 (Small addition of larger 10 mesh for added texture)
Custer Feld	40

Appendix II

Firing:

Fired in down draft gas kiln to Cone 6 (2232 degrees Fahrenheit). Soda/salt mixture (2 pounds salt, 4 pounds soda mixed into 2 gallons hot water) sprayed with weed sprayer into kiln at final temperature. Alternated spraying on both sides of the kiln above burner port. Let vapor burn off slightly before closing damper and turning kiln off.

Appendix III

Other Artists and Comparable Works:

Wayne Higby: Vessel and landscape.
Jill Oberman: Tiles and horizon lines.
James Turrell: Light and experienced space.
Randy Johnson: Functional pots, surface and firing.
Paula Winokur: Materiality of clay, landscape, installation.
Giorgio Morandi: Painting, still-life.
Richard Diebenkorn: Landscape painting, abstraction.
Richard Serra: Large scale installation.

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